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## Images of Confinement : Power Relations, Cultural Industries and the Individual

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**IMAGES OF CONFINEMENT: POWER RELATIONS,  
CULTURAL INDUSTRIES AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

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Bachelor Fine Art (Hons)  
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4<sup>th</sup> June 2004**

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## INTRODUCTION

'A real subject is born from a fictitious relation.' Michael Foucault<sup>1</sup>

'Who are you going to believe me or your eyes?' Groucho Marx<sup>2</sup>

The focus of this writing is a short animated film, by the title of *WILL* and the critical background locating its creation. *WILL* is the story of a wooden boy who is trapped within a windowless room. The room is only an appearance, a subtle deception, its real function is as a cell and the cell is masquerading as a room in the attempt to make its occupant forget he is trapped in the first place. When a series of mysterious images are slid underneath his door, the entry point to his room, they explode the boundaries of his world and provide what may be the key to his escape.

It is, from one viewpoint, the story of an attempted jailbreak from the ideological confines of a panoptic prison. It is my intent to discuss the nature and functioning of the panoptic structure of which this character is apart and suggest techniques for its deconstruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977, p. 199

<sup>2</sup> Fletcher, Alan. *The art of looking sideways*. London : Phaidon. p.215

In addition to *WILL*, I will discuss a feature film directed by Peter Weir and starring Jim Carrey, *The Truman Show*, which I will argue is a representation of contemporary panopticism.

To establish my position in relation to these works I will be referring to two major sources. Each investigates the development of the individual members of a society in relation to that society's power structures. The first part of this study will concentrate on arguments presented by Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. I will present a discussion positing the idea that Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry implies a functioning panopticism as discussed by Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

In chapter one, I will introduce the notion of the Great Escape as a common aspiration promoted within the culture of capitalist societies. I will argue that the desire for escape is indicative of a general condition of entrapment. In seeking ways to determine what is trapped, and how, I will frame the discussion around the individual and explore how the individual in a capitalist system is imprisoned within a regimented behavioural code defined by an immense corporate infrastructure operating within an economic rationalist ideology.

Chapter Two broadens the discussion to introduce the panoptic society

with the aim of describing the extents of its control on the individual according to Foucault. The separations of tasks in the factory production line can be seen as indicative of the general sweeping reforms affecting industry and institutions alike. Dividing a production process into small tasks had multiple benefits for both efficiency and control over workers, which arguably led to the development of technology specifically designed to monitor and control large amounts of workers, by the most economic of means.

Chapter three sets up a case to merge panopticism and the cultural industry in order to describe the contemporary society as a landscape specifically designed for the simultaneous functioning of advertising and surveillance. Realist cinema becomes a powerful tool to reify capitalist culture within the imaginary.

Chapter four and five discuss the analysis of *The Truman Show* and my own film, *WILL*, in terms of the previously established critical framework with a specific focus on whether escape from the confines of the panoptic regime is possible. Both *WILL* and *The Truman Show* are narratives that represent individuals trapped in false realities and their attempts to escape. There is talk of transcendence, however, the arguments of failure seems to ring truer.



## CHAPTER ONE: THE GREAT ESCAPE

*WILL* is the representation of a great escape from a chamber which confines more his mind than his physical self. The great escape has always figured itself a major part in the human imagination. It offers us a small peak through the bars of what are considered reality, a window into a parallel dimension. Feats of escape can ignite the imagination; they are like dramatic space-time interventions which show-up glitches in the seamlessness of reality and reveal its constructed nature. Inversely they can be seen to point a condition of entrapment, a confinement within the normality and suffering of everyday reality.

Hungarian born Harry Houdini is perhaps the most famous escapologist and conjurer of all time, renowned for his daring escapes from ropes, handcuffs, straitjackets, prison cells and under water trunks.<sup>3</sup> Houdini's escapes both resist any rational interpretation and point to discrepancies in

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<sup>3</sup>An example of one Houdini's many escapes is described by Warden James Harris who made the following statement, Washington, D. C. January 6th, 1906; 'This is to certify that Mr. Harry Houdini at the United States Jail today, was stripped stark naked, thoroughly searched, and locked up in cell No. 2 of the South Wing.-- Mr. Houdini, in about two minutes, managed to escape from that cell and then broke into the cell in which his clothing was locked-up. He then proceeds to release from their cells all the prisoners on the ground floor. There was positively no chance for any confederacy or collusion.' Harris, James H (1906,). Retrieved from: <http://www.uelectric.com/houdini/harris.html>

our understanding of reality.

It is this idea of discrepancy that is central to Adorno/Horkheimer's differentiation between art that transcends reality and art which imitates reality. According to them, the great work of art contains the very human qualities of failure and contradiction, 'instead of exposing itself to this failure in which the style of the great work of art has always achieved self-negation, the inferior work has always relied on its similarity with others— a surrogate identity.'<sup>4</sup> The inferior work of art becomes imitation and in doing so it loses its depth and becomes superficial.

Adorno and Horkheimer are referring to a Hegelian dialectic; the concept that every human idea contains its own internal contradictions (composed of the thesis and antithesis) that must struggle to create a new idea (or synthesis which suggests a middle ground). This process of thesis/antithesis/synthesis thus provides the basis for an understanding of knowledge, rationality, and reality. Any system of knowledge or ideology which avoids, denies or represses its antithesis is false. They argue that in a process of standardisation, the process in which a product is prepared for mass-production, any aspect of that product which conflicts with the interests of its economic potential are removed. The process, 'sacrifice[s] whatever

involved a distinction between the logic of the work and that of the social system.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the arguments proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer contain this thread of logic to advance them; an ideology, system or institution which denies it's opposite implies exclusion and denies the validity and even the existence of that which is its antithesis. Capitalism can be seen to take the desire for escape and subvert it for its own use. Rather than dealing with the primary condition of confinement that escape infers, capitalism defines confinement as necessary [to the economic process] and draws attention away from confinement by creating a reward-based system which offers the possibility of escape, but only through economic conditions. Practically this means that to the individual who wishes to escape must become financially equipped to do so. To be financially equipped means to work harder and thus become even more submissive to the system and in the process deny the primary state of confinement.

Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that this submission can be seen in the consumption of the mass-produced culture itself. There is a hierarchy in place which decides on the nature of things to reproduced and distributed,

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<sup>4</sup> Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max (1944). *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London. Verso Edition p. 131

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p.132

'the technical and personnel apparatus which, down to the last cog, itself, forms part of the economic mechanism of selection.'<sup>6</sup> Under this regime content is unified and coded to function between the binary relations of the production-consumption pairing. In other words selected products must have the potential to yield profit and whatever elements inherent in them which may decrease its profit making potential are removed. There may be some authentic types of cultural product, but the mass media/cultural industries prevent authentic content because it first must be commodified and conformed to within the economic of the capitalist system.

Through his discussion on discipline Foucault illuminates the discriminatory systems in the commoditisation chain. Disciplines functions in complex ways, they are both micro and macro mechanisms which control the regulation of power at the very base level of society, at the level of the individual. 'They seem to extend the general forms defined by the law to the infinitesimal level of individual lives; or they appear as methods of training to enable individuals to become integrated into these general demands.'<sup>7</sup> In a factory production process it becomes the separation of labour into smaller, specialist tasks. This functions to increase efficiency by spreading labour over

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid p.122

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, Michel. op. cit pp. 203

a greater surface area as well as limiting the dependency on any particular individual units. The smaller the partitioning of units is within an institution or factory process, the easier to replace and monitor and also to *threaten*.

Will is the prisoner within such a structure, where all individuals have been partitioned in isolation to one another. His predicament resonates with the loneliness of the modern condition. People interact more readily with data and with objects than they do with their fellow human beings. These anonymous souls are hidden away in isolated office cubicles and TV rooms. The world they see transfers itself through hi-tech screens which operate secretly across multiple bandwidths simultaneously connecting and monitoring connections. As I will show in the next chapter, computers may form a part of a very large and efficient mechanism of control.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE NATURE OF THE PRISON

'Beautifully synchronised, don't you agree?' Truman, from *The Truman Show*

If the possibility of escape is real, then do we desire to escape from?

Escape infers containment or enclosure of some sort. So what is being contained and how is it being contained? The individual is that which is contained, but the method and the system of containment is not so easy to describe. Foucault envisages a society which is defined by themes of 'incarceration, imprisonment, control, punishment, surveillance.'<sup>8</sup> Within society all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; 'that of a binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of a coercive assignment of differential distribution (who he<sup>9</sup> is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognised; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc).'<sup>10</sup> His proposition is that these binary divisions are tied-up with disciplinary systems put in place

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault, Michel.(1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, p. 196

<sup>9</sup> Foucault writes at a time before gender neutrality was regarded as important. It is by no means my intent to be so gender specific.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, Michel. op. cit p. 198

during the years of the black plague to prevent the spread of contagion.

What was developed was a hyper-efficient system in which every individual is absolutely compliant to authority because of the very real threat of death.

The plague stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilised by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies – this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city.<sup>11</sup>

Foucault thus situates his investigation within the developing structure of institutions in the search for a language and a subject in which to articulate the nature of containment. The language he makes use of is the purely functional language of institutions, the language of economic rationalism, designed to facilitate the efficient regulation all aspects of society for the specific purpose of controlling production.

The development of this language, Foucault suggests, is inextricably linked with an architectural principle which provided a form for efficient and economic organisation of large numbers of individuals. He uses Bentham's concept of the Panopticon as a metaphor to illustrate the application of power in society today<sup>12</sup>. It is not within the scope of this essay

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault, Michel. op. cit p. 196

<sup>12</sup> Or more accurately at the time of the writing.

to describe the workings of the panopticon in full<sup>13</sup>, I wish only to pick up on a few key points that will serve to align Foucault's theory with Adorno and Horkheimer's cultural industries. That is, a critique suggesting that both theories can be used in conjunction, each enlightening and confirming the observations of the other.

Proposed originally by Jeremy Bentham in early 19th-century England, the panopticon was a prison design that represented an architectural system of social discipline which could be applied not only to prisons but also asylums, factories, schools, etc. Foucault notes,

Bentham was surprised that panoptic institutions could be so light: there were no more bars, chains, no more heavy locks. . . It reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions – to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide – it preserves only the first and eliminates that other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.<sup>14</sup>

In an idea which was the converse of methodologies at the time, the panoptic system functions to create a productive and efficient body by the most cost effective methods, 'It programmes, at the level of an elementary and easily transferable mechanism, the basic functioning of a society penetrated through and through with disciplinary mechanisms.'<sup>15</sup> To maintain order in

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<sup>13</sup> For a more full reading on the panopticon see; Bentham, Jeremy. *The Panopticon Writings*. Ed. Miran Bozovic. (London: Verso, 1995). p. 29-95

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, Michel. op.cit p. 198

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, Michel. op.cit p. 194



capitalist society, the individual, partitioned within a specialist activity, needs to have the belief instilled, that they could be monitored at any point.

In time [Foucault suggests technology needed to develop] such structures would ensure that the people would soon internalise the panoptic tower and police themselves: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection"<sup>16</sup>. This system of control has, arguably, been aided in our own culture by new technological advancements that allow federal agencies to track movement and behaviour (the internet, telephones, cell phones, social security numbers, the census, ATMs, credit cards, and the ever increasing number of surveillance cameras in urban spaces). By providing increased levels of monitoring, technology enables the all-seeing eye of authority operating within the panopticon, to function much the way it has originally been intended, as an omniscient ever present force.

Technological development can be seen as the explicit manifestation of the panoptic societies desire to realise itself. Dino Felluga comments that, 'all of this surveillance and information-gathering leads, of course, to huge

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challenges for the organization and retrieval of data. Perhaps the very move of society into this new mode of social organization made the invention of the computer inevitable since it allows us to organize ever more vast amounts of data.<sup>17</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer confer, 'No mention is made of the fact that the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is greatest. A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself.'<sup>18</sup>

As a rationale for domination within the panoptic system technology becomes a magnifier of efficiency and power.

The panopticon . . . . has the role of amplification; although it arranges power, although it is intended to make it more economic and more effective, it does so not for power itself, nor for the immediate salvation of a threatened society; its aim is to strengthen the social forces – to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and to multiply.<sup>19</sup>

It becomes like a narcissistic resonator within the confines of an eternally reflective cube, endlessly reproducing itself, with every part policing its own conformity to the pattern. For so many individual identity and meaning is found in the act of belonging to a larger organisation. To take on an almost biblical puritanism to the carrying out decrees of the corporation, has been

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p 202-203

<sup>17</sup> Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Foucault: On Panoptic and Carceral Society." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Retrieved (20/05/2004) from <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/newhistoricism/modules/foucaultcarceral.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max. op. cit p.122

the greatest source of pleasure to many individuals.

The results can be seen at the basest level within any retail store today. Each employee is monitored by computer systems on their every transaction of sale. Certain quotas are required to be met, employees with sales over this figure are rewarded, and those with sales under this figure are pressured to improve. It becomes an ultra competitive game to make each time still greater sales, monitoring becoming a mechanism to evaluate your own performance.

A recently documented case described a situation where employees working in telemarketing are monitored even on their toilet breaks.<sup>20</sup> Certain companies after accumulating data, made the decision to restrict toilet breaks to specific timed periods and employees were told to just 'hold on'.<sup>21</sup>

Similar computer controlled monitoring systems are used in all sectors of society. It becomes a system both of fear on one hand by the under performing employee and sadistic pleasure on the other by the employer seated in front of an every increasing array and graphical and figurative

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<sup>19</sup> Foucault, Michel. *op. cit* p. 205

<sup>20</sup> See, Victorian Trades Hall Council's (VTHC) Occupational Health and Safety Unit website; <http://www.ohsrep.org.au/hazards/callcentres.html>

<sup>21</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council's (VTHC) Occupational Health and Safety Unit comments, 'Some employers in this industry have resorted to bullying tactics over the length of time for toilet breaks, all with the aim of keeping up productivity. . . . It is common for call centre workers to be subjected to a variety of personal and group surveillance and monitoring

performance information. There has been demand for continued improvements in monitoring technology. One of Heidegger's later works, *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977), deals with the theme of technology in modern society, what Heidegger called the 'darkening of the world.'

The essence of technology infiltrates human existence more intimately than anything humans could create. The danger of technology lies in the transformation of the human being, by which human actions and aspirations are fundamentally distorted. . . . Instead, technology enters the inmost recesses of human existence, transforming the way we know and think and will. Technology is, in essence, a mode of human existence, and we could not appreciate its mental infiltrations until the computer became a major cultural phenomenon,<sup>22</sup>

This argument, then, suggests that technology not only functions to amplify systems of power but emits a coercive force on humanity to enhance and reproduce its own patterning. Foucault concurs when he describes a 'swarming of disciplinary establishments', throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which he discerns not only form, 'enclosed institutions, but as centres of observation disseminated throughout society.'<sup>23</sup> Like specific wavelengths of sound produce a geometric order in particles, the great horn of panopticism arranges individuals into precise formations of

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mechanisms. Calls can be taped, key strokes recorded, quality of work monitored, what is said, how it is said.'

<sup>22</sup> Heim, Michael (1993): *The metaphysics of virtual reality*; Oxford University Press. p. 8, see also p. 62-66)

uniformity. 'The panoptic schema, without disappearing as such or losing any of its properties, was destined to spread throughout the social body,'<sup>24</sup> Foucault explains; "its vocation was to become a generalized function". The ultimate result is that we now live in the panoptic machine: "we are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism."<sup>25</sup> The secret of its functioning has been to operate in total visibility, where it has become embedded in culture as an automatic and unconscious process. Children are inserted in its mechanism from the beginnings of education and are trained to operated within its code.

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<sup>23</sup> Foucault, Michel. ( 1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translation Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, p. 213

<sup>24</sup> Ibid p. 201

<sup>25</sup> Ibid p.212

### CHAPTER THREE: A SURFACE OF ILLUSION

Every system, at its core, seeks continuity – a principle in physics and mathematics that nothing passes from one state to another without passing through all the intermediate states. From the arguments detailed thus far it can be inferred that it is a desire for continuity that drives ideology to operate as if it were part of a natural order and in doing so, makes the culture it produces appear natural. All culture that fails to pass through the 'intermediary states' of the mass production process are termed un-natural or avant-garde - both are located outside the domain of the culture industry and the dominant ideology and are thus subjected to the binary division of the normal/abnormal branding. Adorno and Horkheimer discuss the culture industry as a machine which is obsessed with continuity, the 'explicit and implicit, exoteric and esoteric catalogue of the forbidden and tolerated is so extensive that it not only defines the area of freedom but is all-powerful inside it. Everything down to the last detail is shaped accordingly.'<sup>26</sup>

Foucault's disciplinary society becomes a meaningful relation here, the disciplines regulated by the panoptic mechanism, 'characterise, classify, specialise [and] distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchise individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and

invalidate.<sup>27</sup> The result is a culture that validates itself and proves its dominance to its subjects at every possible moment, from the workplace to the leisure space to the privacy of the home. I would argue that a recurrent concern of recent literature<sup>28</sup> that the haptic, familiar world of subjective identification may in fact be entirely, or partly illusory, rests in the reality of mass participation in the capitalist ideology.

'Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies,' is the catch-cry from Adorno and Horkheimer's stinging critique on the culture industry whose controlled uniformity must extend into the imaginary. That is into the very dreams and fantasies of its citizens. It must subvert every desire within its field of operation. Capitalism's persistent desire for continuity – the perfect related functioning of all parts, is mirrored in the producer's directive to create even more realistic films. 'The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen.'<sup>29</sup> Realism becomes a technique for embedding and affirming ideology. It is not that the realist mode has any more invested in

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<sup>26</sup> Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max op. cit p. 131

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, Michel. op cit. p. 208

<sup>28</sup> Supported by the significance accorded such notions in recent art and theory that familiar world of subjective reality may be entirely or partly illusory (Baudrillard, Foster, Sherman etc.)

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max op. cit p. 126

the cultural process of ideology, but rather it can *appear* to have. Patrick Fuery elaborates, 'part of the reason for this is that ideology itself operates as if it is part of the natural order, and in doing so makes the culture appear as natural.'<sup>30</sup> In panopticism this is illustrated by a 'real subject being born out of a fictitious relation.'<sup>31</sup> It seems natural that individuals must be monitored so that efficiency can be calculated and measures taken to increase profit.

Maintaining this illusion requires an astounding amount of productive power. Capitalism desire to inhabit all territories with its mechanism and this requires an immense production apparatus to provide the attention to detail necessary to sustain the illusion, 'the rare capacity minutely to fulfil the obligations of the natural idiom in all branches of the culture industry becomes the criterion of efficiency.' Yet it must be profit-determined,' What and how they say it must be measurable by everyday language, as in logical positivism.'<sup>32</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer suggest the culture industry, in the process of commodifying - the moulding of objects to conform to the criteria of mass production - has made everything bland and identical by removing any parts of an object that decentre or oppose the dominant ideology. It is this factor which causes the removal of authenticity, and replaces the thing

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<sup>30</sup> Fuery, Patrick. (2000). *New Developments in Film Theory*. London. MacMillan Press Ltd. p.123

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, Michel. *op. cit* p. 219



with a stamp of sameness everywhere, 'the style of the culture industry, which no longer has to test itself against any refractory material, is also the negation of style.'<sup>33</sup>

Watching a film of this is more like enacting a ritual; the details are interchangeable, it is only the effects that give the impression of difference, or more correctly it is only the surface of effects that obscures the real intent.

If we look to Foucault for direction, cinema becomes a device to control the gaze, realist modes of cinema function like surveillance towers of the panopticon. Each scene is meticulously created through the mechanical process to create a certain framing of reality. By the manipulation of numerous edits and changes in point of view the spectator is given the impression of becoming an omniscient observer within the tower. The content and the plot become secondary to the immense pleasure extracted from the power of looking (without being observed), 'it does not matter what motivates him: the curiosity of the indiscreet, the malice of a child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher who wishes to visit this museum of human nature, or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing.'<sup>34</sup> Just as with the watcher in the panoptic surveillance tower is

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<sup>32</sup> Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max op. cit p. 147

<sup>33</sup> Ibid p. 129

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, Michel. op. cit p. 195-228

interchangeable, any individual can be subjected to the cinematic gaze.

The role of the cinema then is as a grand simulator in which to a multiplicity of functions are carried. The individual is told how to look at the world, and what things in the world look like and what things to look for. As an extension of the real world, realist cinema can be a device for the setting in place a culture in which the desire for consumption can be profoundly directed.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE TRUMAN SHOW

The Truman Show, written by Andrew Nicchols and directed by Peter Weir, explores the idea of a character who is trapped within a reality TV show of which he is the unwitting subject. Jim Carrey stars as Truman, an upstanding, innocent rube that lives in an artificial sound stage world created just for him, his life is a fiction, manipulated by an unseen director [aptly named Christof] for the sake of a live soap opera broadcast 24 hours a day -- "The Truman Show." Truman Burbank has grown up on television, and he has literally been ON television from the moment of his birth. 'With the honour of being the first child to be formally adopted by a corporation, Truman has had every moment of his existence captured by television cameras.'<sup>35</sup> He has no inkling of this – to him the world is real, together with the characters that populate the town of Seahaven; his wife, Meryl, his best friend, Marlon, his mother etc, are in fact all just apart of the script.

The town is enclosed in a giant dome decked out with high-tech simulations of sun and sky, in which the rain and wind are courtesy of the special effects department. Truman alone has no idea he is in a giant TV studio, as the rest of humanity watches him go from one staged situation to

another in a non-stop telethon of reality programming that lets audiences enjoy a little pathos and vicarious emotion.

But into this ersatz paradise, there inevitably appears a snake. After the crew makes mistakes that cause the seamlessness of the illusion to break down; a studio lamp suddenly falls out of the sky in front of his house, a homeless man resembling his late father who supposedly drowned in a boating accident when Truman was a child, tries to make contact but is forcibly removed from the 'set', Truman's car radio picks up the communications traffic between the 'backstage' people. Truman slowly begins to become aware that his surroundings are full of staged scenes and events. He then tries to make his escape, only to come up against both his own fears, which keep him from leaving, and the obstacles put in his way by the producer-director who has made billions trapping him in a stage set and playing God with his life.

The fake landscape Truman mirrors our own media landscape in which news, politics, advertising and public affairs are increasingly made up of theatrical illusions. Like our contemporary media landscape, it is convincing in its realism, with lifelike simulations and story lines, from the high-tech

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<sup>35</sup>Leong, Anthony. *The Truman Show*, <sup>35</sup>Leong, Anthony. *The Truman Show*, <http://www.eyepiece.com/culture/9806/980606al.stm>

facsimile of a sun that benevolently beams down on Truman to the mock sincerity of the actor he mistakenly believes is his best friend. As things start to go wrong it is revealed that Seahaven is a model of a society in which every aspect of life has been meticulously selected to function within a field of advertising, 'the producers of The Truman Show insert numerous blatant attempts at product placement. And despite the show's promise of showing a real, genuine life on the screen, everything that happens to Truman has been scripted beforehand, just like the dialogue and emotions of his fellow Seahaven residents.'<sup>36</sup>

Commodities dominate a formerly human landscape allowing advertising and life to become seamlessly intermingled. Meryl proudly states in the beginning the film, 'Well, I mean, there is no--there is no difference between a private life and public life. My--my life is my life, is The Truman Show. The Truman Show is...a lifestyle. It's a noble life. It is...a truly blessed life.'<sup>37</sup> She stutters her lines because it is she who probably has the greatest lie to maintain in the Truman show, for Meryl has sold herself to the corporation to become a commodity herself, as a whore to Truman and the major

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Niccol, Andrew, (1998) *The Truman Show – Transcript v.2.1* Franklin, Dana and Simpson, Frank (transcribers)The Unofficial Free Truman Site (accessed 6/4/2004) <http://www.unofficial.com/Truman/TrumanShow.html>

corporate tool to promote products within the show. 'Advertising is its [the culture industry's] elixir of life.'<sup>38</sup> It is also the elixir of *The Truman Show*, where advertising becomes the meaning for living, not only in the economic sense, advertising is central to social status, 'It's a noble life', is indicative of 'advertising for its own sake, a pure representation of social power.'<sup>39</sup>

Advertising and surveillance has become the nervous system of Seahaven. As Truman goes about his daily business, kissing his wife in the morning, exchanging pleasantries with the neighbours, driving in his car, and kissing up to the boss at work, every step is captured from different points of views by the five thousand cameras that dot the artificial town. Any foreign entities that threaten to disrupt the pre-scripted flow of events, such as the woman who reveals to him that he is on TV, or the re-appearance of the actor who is his father, are quickly swarmed upon and disposed of as if they were malignant cells in the bloodstream. Marshall McLuhan's statement that, 'television has become our eyes, the telephone our mouth and ears; our brains are the interchange for a nervous system that stretches across the whole world,' become sinister when viewed alternatively as mechanisms of panoptic control.<sup>40</sup> Technology in Truman becomes the medium in which,

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<sup>38</sup> Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max. op. cit p. 125

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.142

<sup>40</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. (1967). *The medium is the message* Harmondsworth : Penguin. p.63

'inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere.'

Not only within the film either. Peter Weir commented that Carrey said straight out, 'I could draw off the feelings I have.' He said, 'I'm a prisoner.' Just like Truman, Carrey finds his *real* life subjected to the constant interrogation of the media. In the public psyche success and fame are determinates of ultimate freedom, yet the reality to most is a life subject to even more rigorous control. 'Well, all these stars have their houses swept quite regularly by people who work in the surveillance security business. They come in and they look for bugs and things. You know if you bring a repair person in to fix the plumbing or something, that person, in Hollywood, could plant a microphone or a camera.' And who is to say that the people who work in the security business may not be in on the game as well. Success in the culture industry only brings on more a rigorous net of control. On entering success status, Carrey became a commodity, a commodity owned by the production company who in turn license him to the media.

The level of consumption by the general public of even the most mediocre pictures of stars in their everyday life parallels the fanatical reaction with the religious miracle. The stars become like deities and function as models of escape, for so many in the working class. They are real life evidence that

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individuals can rise up and become independent of the system. Adorno and Horkheimer note, 'the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably they insist on the ideology which enslaves them.'<sup>41</sup>

The spectators in *The Truman Show* [the show in the film] are thus implicated as well. The movie isn't only a satire of television and other forms of media. It aims many of its most pointed barbs at the film audience. The audience hang on Truman's every expression in the attempt to feel *something*, mirror our own spectatorship. We are the ones who make this system possible, the movie tells us. 'The attitude of the public which ostensibly and actually favours the system of the culture industry is a part of the system and not an excuse for it.'<sup>42</sup> The willingness of the audience to exploit Truman so it can enjoy his life as entertainment is our own willingness to exploit an endless parade of human victims of news and reality programming because they have the misfortune to be part of some "newsworthy" event. 'It reminds me of when you see an accident up ahead,' says director Peter Weir. 'Will I look or keep staring ahead? Television is like an accident in your living room. It's always there. It's always on. People seem unable to switch it off.'

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<sup>41</sup> Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max. op. cit p.120 -167

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p.120 -167



Perhaps in the act of watching there are two forces in action, one being related to an interest in the activity of the subject and the other being the transference of the fear of being watched into the power invested in becoming the watcher.

The production of fear is central to both the panopticon and the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, 'the might of industrial society is lodged in men's minds. The entertainment manufacturers know that their products will be consumed with alertness when the customer is distraught, for each of them is a model of the huge economic machinery which has always sustained the masses.'<sup>43</sup> Each product becomes a symbol of the infinitely greater power of the industrial machine which both protects and holds prisoner the individual consumers within it. Products don't come cheap; they come coded with submission to a form; 'the product prescribes every reaction; not by its natural structure (which collapse under reflection), but by signals.' In every way possible, any calling for mental effort is avoided. The individual in submitting mentally and emotionally to the ideology is forced to regress into dependency, like a child sucking on the teat of the corporation (Truman himself has the honour of being the first child to

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<sup>43</sup> Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max. op. cit p. 123

be formally adopted by a corporation.)

There is a reflection here of elements of Freud deployed by Adorno and Horkheimer as explanations of the culture industry's hold over the individual. Truman's fear of leaving this invented world, once he realizes it is a fraud, can be construed as a reluctance to break a symbiotic relationship with the mother/media for fear of castration from the father/economy. 'The principle that dictates that he should be so determined that he feels himself to be the eternal consumer, the object of the culture industry.'<sup>44</sup>

Echoing the mother principle together with the more sinister surveillance of the panopticon Adorno and Horkheimer describe, 'the necessity inherent in the system not to leave the customer alone, not for a moment to allow him any suspicion that resistance is possible.' Christo, literally depicted as God, personified as the wrathful father figure and also producer-director of this stage-set world, who blocks Truman's effort to escape, can be likened to the giant media companies, news organizations, and media-politicians that have a stake in keeping individuals consuming within the capitalist machine, and are prepared to lure us with rewards as they block efforts at reforming the system.

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<sup>44</sup> Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max. op. cit p. 128

The nature of the prison relies on cultivating the sustained belief within the mind of the individual of their total dependency on its products and the inevitability of its mechanisms. The culture industry becomes just another institution that can be understood in relation the discourse of the panopticon. A ceaseless and relentless pressuring of disciplinary mechanisms filtering down to the infinitesimal level of individual lives ensures the call to order of the producer. If there are ever any disputes, anyone in the production chain is replaceable. Care is taken in the formation of the production chain to dissect various operations into discreet segregated and repetitive tasks that ensure the least possible reliance of specific individuals. This hierarchy also has the function to separate groups into individual cells, thereby allowing information transactions, on an 'as needed' basis and permits only the elite to have to full access to the 'master plan', so to speak. Stratifying the production process in this way has the added advantage of monitoring the production levels of each individual with far greater efficiency when compared with attempting to monitor an individual responsible for the undertaking of many complex tasks.

Meaning becomes lost in such a production process, and so is any relationship with the end result. When one's only contribution toward the

finished product has been, for example, the inking of a cell for animation, or the stitching of an arm panel for garment, what kind of meaning can one possibly extract? The enormous work embedded in any one mass-produced object is so often buried in its homogenised style.

It comes as no surprise to hear "People are losing a sense of reality, blurring reality and unreality," said director Weir. "We see the viewers [in the film], quite ordinary people, enjoying the show. Whether it's fiction or not fiction, they don't really know or care."<sup>45</sup> In a mechanical process the signatures of imperfection and discrepancy are removed and the relationship of the individual to the whole is at its best abstract. Reality becomes defined by the objects produced. Identity becomes inseparable from the individual's function in the production chain. Thus when Truman eventually battles to escape the giant dome, rupturing the trompe l'oeil sky with his sail boat, it seems the audience barely cares and will just look elsewhere for engagement. Truman himself has only escaped the confines of one construction to enter another. He is replaceable by a thousand others who vie to star in a popular fiction.

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<sup>45</sup> Blackwelder, Rob (1998) *SPLICED* interviewed Peter Weir, retrieved 12/05/2004 from <http://www.splicedonline.com/features/weir.html>

## CHAPTER FIVE: WILL

Our society is one not of the spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, the continuous, the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralisation of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies.<sup>46</sup>

If Truman has been the fleshy fabrication of the corporation, *WILL* is an extension into the not too distant future where the individual is so completely trapped within a mechanistic system the body has been repressed into a form only barely human. The subject of the film is the individual's resistance and negotiation within a hierarchical power structure of which it is confined.

Will is a wooden marionette and it is only the eyes that remain organic as they stare out forlornly from a frozen porcelain face. There is the appearance of comfort within the room he inhabits, but in reality it is a computer simulation, a data-cage masquerading as a room in the attempt to make the occupant forget that he was ever trapped. Physical cameras have become unnecessary, as the very surface of the room consists of data and is therefore capable of recording and transmitting information to a central source. The perspective the spectator is given, is that of the observer in the panoptic

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<sup>46</sup> Foucault, Michel. op. cit p. 213

tower, the gaze being constrained for the most part through fixed cameras dotted about the room which give the impression of an unseen outsider looking in on a captive in a box.

Will has been isolated from any contact from an outside source, he merely has to obey a readout on a type-writer like machine which he is forced to operate and complete the most microscopic of tasks; the colouring of a single pixel, red, green or blue. A strip of film carries the pixel off into the void, making the inference that he is part of a larger production chain, which is in fact an image production line. The plot is simple to outline;

A camera tracks along an animated filmstrip in space and then moves closer, entering its animated frames and simultaneously Will's room to give us the first encounter of Will, who is lying motionless on the floor. It is inferred that some dramatic event has just occurred. Will remembers nothing, but there is something deeply unsettling about the small door, the only entry to his room. Will looks something like a wood carved Marionette, yet his legs are of a more advanced prosthetic construction. Painted on his wood carved body is the impression of a grey suit. His face is made of porcelain and on close inspection there are many fine fractures in the surface. Very noticeable is the very life-like quality of his eyes. The overall effect being the look of a person trapped behind a mask. He is alone in the room

apart from an inert stuffed monkey who lays limbs splayed out on the bed.

A small piece of paper with a photograph slides into the room from underneath the miniature door. The first image that appears is that of photograph of Will's room taken through a fisheye camera. Will is positioned in the centre the room with his back to the camera. Unnerved by this image Will shoves it back under the door. It soon reappears again. Will kicks it back under the door this time, but it returns again. Frustrated Will picks up the photograph and takes it over to his desk. He begins to scratch at it with his right thumb and quickly and savagely erases his own image. Satisfied Will thrusts it back under the door. He waits and listens. Nothing.

Will lies down on his bed and awakens to find a sealed box waiting on his floor. This process is repeated and a coded conversation develops between WILL and the unknown external deliverer. The first box is then followed by several more similar appearances of boxes, all them containing objects. Will becomes industrious and we find him constructing a strange machine, built out of the very fabric of his room and the various objects which have arrived in boxes. It soon becomes clear that Will is building a catapult-like machine and is planning to launch himself through the walls of his room.

The attempt fails in a most diabolical way; the monkey accidentally triggers the mechanism of the catapult, and is fired into the wall, while the

catapult, in the process of operation undergoes a dramatic metamorphosis into a corkscrew. Without skipping a beat the corkscrews whirrs to life and drills directly into Wills astonished wooden behind, catapulting him in the same arc of motion into the wall the monkey has just slammed into.

In this moment of despair, Will consults his plans for the machine. As he scans over the drawing he notices a small artifact in the picture, a disturbance in the surface of the image. He looks closer and the point of view cuts to Will, the camera accelerates forward and zooms into the image until pixels fill the screen. The zooming continues until the pixels evidently become boxes, boxes which, as the camera gets closer appear to be thousands of small rooms, identical in size and structure to Will's room. We zoom in slowly to one of them which is identical to Will's room and find a body this time human lying in the same position as we found Will at the beginning. The screen fades to white and forms a small white cube. The cube shrinks to the size of a pixel and winks out.

Central to the construction of the film is the control of the gaze; in fact the film can almost be construed as being entirely about looking, and particularly the awareness involved in looking. The spectator's gaze is led into Will's room by directly entering an image of the filmstrip itself, which has the function of enunciating the forthcoming constructed space. Nothing



in Will's room is real, not even Will himself, the entire work exists only as an arrangement of data within a machine. In Foucault's term the spectator is entering the discourse itself, not that they ever left it, but the in the language of the film it is attempting to promote awareness of itself and its constructed nature by reference to the image of the filmstrip.

Once inside the room the gaze is constrained through fixed cameras, as in the Truman Show, where the story is told by the inter-cutting of many hidden security cameras, except for one. The one free-floating camera in *WILL* is loaded with intent and fulfills the role of an omniscient eye, the mysterious external source. The computer provides Foucault's technological apparatus to maintain the panoptic power relation, 'the Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the seeing/being seen dyad; in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.'<sup>47</sup>

The paper deliveries Will receives are also coded in the language of surveillance. The first image posted underneath Will's door is a fisheye view of his room, which is both a code for being monitored and code for resistance to order. By displaying a distorted representation of the room, there is a subtext which asks Will to look at his room differently.

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<sup>47</sup> Foucault, Michel. op. cit p.196

The look of Will's room is rendered photographically to give an impression of reality. The function of the room is to make its occupant forget that his is contained, in a similar way the culture industry, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, functions to stunt the imagination and awareness of the individual,

the most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions.<sup>48</sup>

The culture industry attempts to define identity within its binary pairing of production and consumption. *WILL* is representative of this fixity. Almost, everything in his room speaks of linearity, repetition, the cliché and mass production; his rectilinear furniture, his rectangular room, his routine repetitive labor, his molded face etc. Only the monkey and the rabbit lamp speak of something personal, but in reality they are just copies as well. The entire room is so lacking in personality, it could easily be a military issue, with a thousand duplicates. Yet it still provides some comfort in its warm red floor and floral wallpaper. It is functional and comfortable, if not personal.

It is shown in the film that Will reacts quite decisively to the first paper delivery by scratching himself out of the image altogether. This action

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<sup>48</sup> Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max. op. cit p.132

constitutes an important device which is repeated throughout the film. As a tactical maneuver scratching becomes a sign of resistance; by removing himself from the photograph Will refuses to be monitored or even *identified*. In a Foucauldian sense, in the act of erasure Will deconstructs himself, in the language of Adorno and Horkheimer, Will negates himself. When the scratched paper delivery is returned it becomes a double negation; where Will negated himself the mysterious source Will is in correspondence with negates the room and returns Will into the frame. Will responds with a third erasure of himself revealing in the process an under image – a partial view of what turns out to be the first component of the machine; an iris. In this exchange Will engages in a dialectic conversation, thesis, then antithesis followed by a new integrated idea; synthesis represented in the genesis of the machine.

The paper deliveries become almost like a conversation on palimpsest, a dialectic conversation involving erasure. This conversation becomes the basis on which Will begins the deconstruction of his room and the ensuing construction of the machine, a process represented in the basic principles of Foucault and Derrida,

To deconstruct history or texts in the style of Derrida or Foucault is to make evident that play of difference - that ungraspable network of relations, which sustains but is concealed by claims to self-presence. It is, in other words, to offer an insight into, or partial presentation of, a totality

which as a totality is unpresentable. This, as Derrida remarks, "gives great pleasure."<sup>49</sup>

Each subsequent machine part is revealed in the same process; Will scratching out his own image to reveal a partial view of a machine part in the negative space constituted by the absence of his body. Under the surface of his own image he discovers the secret mechanism of escape. The machine Will creates is an extension of himself, constructed intuitively on the logic of his own "genetic" code. Stealing the Promethean fire, the creation turns creator. As he learns to investigate beyond the surface of things, he learns the secrets of his own nature.

For a moment Will is confident of success and escape from his confinement seems imminent. As the film shows, however, the machine fails in the most diabolical fashion, by metamorphosing into a corkscrew which drills directly up his rectum. In this absurd return to source, the machine internalizes itself in the back in the body of Will. It is only at this point that Will achieves any kind of escape, but it is not what he expects. The master plan becomes the Rosetta stone in the equation, and it is only when Will despairs and stares intensely at the drawing that he has insight. There is a binary shift in scale as the camera shifts to Will's point of view and descends

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<sup>49</sup> CROWTHER, Paul, (1989) *Beyond Art and Philosophy - Deconstruction and the Post-Modern*

into the drawing and a world of pixels.

The sequence portrayed here of a descent into a world of identical uniform boxes can be seen as moment of awareness. He witnesses the world deconstructed for a brief period of time. There is a gap in the bars of ideology and Will slips through for a moment to see so many others in the same predicament, individuals confined in solitary rooms, all unaware of each other, before he descends into another room identical to his own. A human boy is lying there like a tin soldier, in a pose identical to that of Will's at the very beginning of the film. There has been some shift and that has been bodily. Will in achieving this insight, has, perhaps gained a body with real organs.

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Sublime included in PAPADAKIS, A. (ed) Deconstruction, London, Academy Editions

## CONCLUSION

This writing promised at the beginning to offer an escape, a great one as well. I apologise if I have in fact revealed the *myth* escape instead. The individual perhaps dreams and even desires to escape, particularly under conditions of confinement, the types of which have been discussed herein. Perhaps if I rearrange a previous quotation from Adorno and Horkheimer, by replacing success with escape,' perhaps the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of escape even more than the escapees [the successful]. Immovably they insist on the ideology that enslaves them.' If there is a widely held view that escape is possible the blame rests entirely on a culture that thrives on the idea.

From the two films we have discussed, the attempt to escape seems only leads back to another place of confinement. Truman escapes Seahaven, only to enter an outside world where the media construct reality in much the same way he did when he was trapped in his reality TV show and was entirely unaware of them. Will in his descent in the world of pixels, attains insight only momentarily, before falling back into the enclosure of his small windowless room.

It would appear, then, that escape from the very fabric of one's own

make-up is not possible. It's a little like drying to get out of a suit which is made of your own skin.

Foucault clarifies this statement.

it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies.<sup>50</sup>

If *WILL* and *Truman* received illumination by deconstructing their surrounds, it did not affect the physical environment they inhabited. They still remain apart of a cycle of production and consumption, which they have resisted and seen through, yet still must persist to take part. Whether or not this makes the suffering of day to day even greater is not a topic explored by either film. The forces present in culture will still attempt to bind them to a norm, with ever increasing persistency. As technology continues to develop at an exponential rate, will the penalty as Foucault suggest also harden to an extreme point, 'an infinite discipline: an interrogation with end, and investigation that would be extended without limit to a meticulous and ever more analytic observation. . . .'<sup>51</sup> The present war on terror gives all the indications of being *an interrogation without end*, the investigation of information surround events such as the Bali bombing, *extend without a limit to a meticulous and ever analytic end*. In all this increasing confinement is there

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<sup>50</sup> Foucault, Michel. op. cit p. 198

such a thing as will?

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p.228



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